



Right Web

Tracking militarists' efforts to influence U.S. foreign policy

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Bernard Lewis

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- **Princeton University:** Professor Emeritus, Near Eastern Studies
- **Committee for Peace and Security in the Middle East:** Letter Signatory
- **American Enterprise Institute:** Irving Kristol Award Recipient, 2007

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Bernard Lewis, who celebrated his 97th birthday in 2013, is a renowned British-American historian of Islam and the Middle East. A former British intelligence officer, Foreign Office staffer, and Princeton University professor, Lewis is the author of some three-dozen books about the Middle East.

Lewis has received praise from both admirers and critics for the nuance and breadth of his work, with many considering his accounts on the origins of the Shiite Ismaili sect and the modern Turkish republic to be authoritative. But Lewis has also stoked controversy for his at times chauvinistic attitude towards the Arab and Islamic worlds. The late Palestinian-American literary theorist Edward Said—who had a long-running feud with Lewis—once accused him of promoting "demagogy and downright ignorance."^[1]

Lewis has also drawn criticism for his associations with prominent neoconservatives and foreign policy hawks, particularly former Vice President [Dick Cheney](#), and for his purported influence on the George W. Bush administration's Middle East policies.

Neoconservatism and Military Intervention in the Middle East

Lewis' assertions about conflict between Islam and the West—as well as his insistence on the potential receptiveness of the Muslim world to democracy—have made him a favorite thinker among neoconservatives for decades.

In the 1970s, he emerged as a staunch critic of the Soviet Union and a strident supporter of Israel. Historian Joel Beinin called Lewis "perhaps the most articulate and learned Zionist advocate in the North American Middle East academic community."^[2] In a 2006 [Weekly Standard](#) piece marking Lewis' 90th birthday, [Reuel Marc Gerecht](#)—a neoconservative writer who called Lewis the *marja-e-taqlid*, a term from Shiite Muslim legal scholarship that means "the source"—recalled that in 1970, "[Richard Perle](#), as a young staffer for Washington Sen. Henry 'Scoop' Jackson, observed Lewis giving a speech, and was astonished by his eloquence and historical reach."^[3]



Lewis forged particularly close relations with Dick Cheney, first when Cheney served as George H.W. Bush's secretary of defense, and later when he was George W. Bush's vice president. In a May 2006 speech honoring Lewis, Cheney recalled that Lewis had come to Washington to advise him on a "way forward in the Middle East" soon after Iraq had invaded Kuwait. "I decided that day that this was a man I wanted to keep in touch with, and whose work I should follow carefully in the years ahead," said Cheney. "Since then we have met often, particularly during the last four-and-a-half years, and Bernard has always had some very good meetings with President Bush."^[4]

Observers have pointed to Lewis' influence as being instrumental in shaping Cheney's worldview, and ultimately impacting the direction of U.S. foreign policy after the 9/11 attacks. For instance, Brent Scowcroft, George H.W. Bush's national security adviser, once argued that Cheney's transformation into a Middle East hawk was partly due to the influence of Lewis. As [Jeffrey Goldberg](#) reported: "Lewis, Scowcroft said, fed a feeling in the White House that the United States must assert itself. ... Cheney, in particular, Scowcroft thinks, accepted Lewis's view of Middle East politics." Said Scowcroft: "It's that idea that we've got to hit somebody hard. ... And Bernard Lewis says, 'I believe that one of the things you've got to do to Arabs is hit them between the eyes with a big stick. They respect power.'"^[5]

Despite his later assertions that he opposed the Iraq war, Lewis directly participated in campaigns to agitate for regime change in the years preceding the U.S. invasion. In 1998, he signed a letter sent by the Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf (a spinoff of the [Center for Security Policy](#)) to President Bill Clinton that called for a "comprehensive political and military strategy for bringing down Saddam and his regime." Other signatories, most of whom also supported the then-newly created [Project for the New American Century](#), included such figures as Perle, [John Bolton](#), [Donald Rumsfeld](#), [Frank Gaffney](#), [Paul Wolfowitz](#), [William Kristol](#), [Robert Kagan](#), [Elliott Abrams](#), [Douglas Feith](#), and [Zalmay Khalizad](#).^[6]

After the 9/11 attacks, Lewis's views converged closely with those of neoconservatives and Republican hawks pressing for military action in Middle East. In various opinion pieces he wrote following the attacks, Lewis expressed his support for the "war on terror,"^[7] cautioned against making alliances of convenience with authoritarian regimes,

and asserted that "real peace" in the Middle East "will only come" from the "defeat, or, preferably, collapse" of dictatorships in the region. "Regime change," he wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2002, "may well be dangerous, but sometimes the dangers of inaction are greater than those of action."[\[8\]](#)

In late September 2001, the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, an advisory panel led by Richard Perle, held a closed session to consider military action against Iraq. Perle invited Lewis to attend the meeting along with [Ahmed Chalabi](#), leader of a U.S.-funded Iraqi exile group that advocated Saddam Hussein's ouster and enjoyed cozy ties with several high-profile neoconservatives. Lewis told the board that the United States should support democratic reformers in the Middle East, "such as my friend here, Ahmed Chalabi."[\[9\]](#)

In 2004, the *New Yorker* published an extensive examination of Lewis' influence in the post-9/11 period by Ian Buruma. "A mentor to Henry (Scoop) Jackson in the early nineteen-seventies, and a friend to several Israeli Prime Ministers, Lewis has been especially sought after in Washington since September 11," Buruma wrote. "[Karl Rove](#) invited him to speak at the White House. [Richard Perle](#) and Dick Cheney are among his admirers. Lewis has championed his friend [Ahmed Chalabi](#) for a leading role in Iraq. And his best-selling book *What Went Wrong?*, about the decline of Muslim civilization, is regarded in some circles as a kind of handbook in the war against Islamist terrorism. Lewis, in short, is a thoroughly political don, and if anyone can be said to have provided the intellectual muscle for recent U.S. policy toward the Middle East it would have to be him."[\[10\]](#)

Similarly, while reflecting on Lewis' influence on the Bush administration, journalist Jacob Weisberg anointed him "perhaps the most significant intellectual influence behind the invasion of Iraq."[\[11\]](#)

In his 2012 memoir *Notes on a Century*, however, Lewis denied this characterization, claiming that while he did have a personal audience with President Bush and members of his administration, he actually advised *against* invading Iraq. According to a review by [Middle East Forum](#) fellow David P. Goldman, "Lewis explicitly warned against a simple-minded rush to parliamentary forms in the Muslim world, hoping instead for a gradual expansion of existing consultative mechanisms into something that would approach democracy at some undermined date. But Lewis and the neoconservatives shared an inherent optimism about the changing Muslim culture that informed the national mood after Sept. 11."[\[12\]](#)

Instead of invading Iraq, Lewis said, he told the Bush administration to focus more on supporting dissidents inside Iran. "My primary concern was Iran's nuclear program," he wrote in his memoir, "not toppling Saddam Hussein."[\[13\]](#)

Indeed, Lewis has long claimed—despite the insistence of the U.S. intelligence community to the contrary—that Iran is building a nuclear weapon. In a 2006 op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*, Lewis claimed not only that Iran had been working on a nuclear bomb for some 15 years, but also speculated that it might even be planning an "apocalyptic" attack on Israel for that very year.[\[14\]](#) (The attack never materialized, and the following year a U.S. intelligence estimate reported that Iran's nuclear weapons research had been suspended years previously.)

Lewis has also peddled the notion, common among many neoconservative ideologues, that millenarian beliefs among Iran's leaders make them impervious to rational decision-making about nuclear weapons, claiming that they would use the weapons even knowing that they could be wiped out as a result. "For them," Lewis told the [Hoover Institution's](#) Peter Robinson, mutually assured destruction is "not a deterrent, it's an inducement."[\[15\]](#) Realist scholars,[\[16\]](#) and even some Israeli military officers,[\[17\]](#) have long disputed this notion, arguing that Iran's leaders are as rational as those of any other country when it comes to ensuring their own survival.

Lewis continues to be an icon for many neoconservatives. The [American Enterprise Institute](#), the institutional home of many of the Bush era's most vigorous Iraq hawks, awarded Lewis its annual [Irving Kristol](#) award in 2007—putting Lewis in the company of such right-wing dignitaries as Dick Cheney, [Robert Bork](#), [Jeane Kirkpatrick](#), Ronald Reagan, Clarence Thomas, and [Norman Podhoretz](#), among others.[\[18\]](#) According to a *Wall Street Journal* account of the awards ceremony, Lewis used the occasion to describe "Muslim migration to Europe as an Islamic attack on

the West" and gave a "ringing endorsement of the ill-fated Crusades." According to the *Journal*, Lewis said that "as atrocious as they were," the Crusades "were nonetheless an understandable response to the Islamic onslaught of the preceding centuries, and that it was ridiculous to apologize for them."[\[19\]](#)

Writings and Critics

In his writings on the Middle East, Lewis often seems to swing from well-cultivated admiration to nuanced criticism, and sometimes to outright antipathy. This apparent inconsistency led one reviewer to wonder "whether Lewis possessed two minds, one of the diligent and cautious historian, the other belonging to a glib and strident advocate of neo-liberal force."[\[20\]](#)

Lewis has characterized the Islamic world as a "great civilization" with a vibrant culture, and he has fervently rejected the notion that Muslims are incapable of building a democracy rooted in their own traditions.[\[21\]](#) Unlike hard-right "Islamophobes" who paint terrorism or violent *jihad* as intrinsic to the faith, Lewis has characterized Islamic terrorism as having "no antecedents in Islamic history, and no justification in terms of Islamic theology, law, or tradition."[\[22\]](#) Countering fear-mongering critics like [Frank Gaffney](#) and [Daniel Pipes](#), who have accused Muslims of trying to impose "dhimmitude" on non-believers, Lewis has written that historically, "Muslim tolerance of unbelievers was far better than anything available in Christendom."[\[23\]](#)

However, Lewis has also been one of the foremost proponents of the notion that the West and the Islamic world are engaged in a "clash of civilizations." In fact, although the phrase is more associated with the late Samuel Huntington, Lewis is thought to have coined it in a 1990 essay called "The Roots of Muslim Rage."[\[24\]](#) Among his other controversial statements, Lewis has asserted that the "capacity for empathy, vicariously experiencing the feelings of others, is a peculiarly Western feature,"[\[25\]](#) and claimed that Muslims consider it "right and normal" for Muslims to "rule over non-Muslims," while the reverse is "an offense against the laws of God and nature."[\[26\]](#) In one particularly stark example from his 2010 book *Faith and Power: Religion and Politics in the Middle East*, Lewis wrote that "Either we bring them freedom, or they destroy us."[\[27\]](#)

Many critics, including Edward Said, have charged that Lewis' work, in its focus on precolonial history as a prism for interpreting Middle East affairs, downplays the role of recent foreign intervention in shaping current events. Echoing these critics, Buruma said that Lewis' "writings give the impression that British and French imperialism, U.S. interventions, and Israeli oppression of Palestinians are simply alibis for the region's political failures."[\[28\]](#)

In 2004, Michael Hirsh, senior editor at *Newsweek*, sharply critiqued Lewis in *Washington Monthly*, proclaiming that "America's misreading of the Arab world—and our current misadventure in Iraq—may have recently begun in 1950." That year, Lewis went to Turkey and, while studying, had a "vision of a secularized Westernized Arab democracy that casts off the medieval shackles of Islam and enters modernity at last." Hirsh noted that the Bush administration's main rationale for its occupation of Iraq, after failing to find weapons of mass destruction, was what the *Wall Street Journal* called the "Lewis Doctrine." But instead of resulting in "a Western polity, reconstituted and imposed from above like Kemal's Turkey, that is to become a bulwark of security for America and a model for the region," Hirsh observed that the legacy of the so-called Lewis Doctrine in Iraq has been the "passing from a secular to an increasingly radicalized and Islamicized society."[\[29\]](#)

By interpreting the 9/11 attacks as part of a clash of civilization that dates back a thousand years or more, Hirsh said, Lewis helped shape the war on terrorism as a war against Islamists. "Did Lewis' misconceptions lead the Bush administration to make a terrible strategic error?" Hirsh wondered. "If Bernard Lewis's view of the Arab problem was in error, then America missed a chance to round up and destroy a threat—al Qaida—that in reality existed only on the sick margins of the Islamic world."[\[30\]](#)

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- **Committee for Peace and Security in the Gulf:** Signatory
- **American Enterprise Institute:** Irving Kristol Award Recipient, 2007

Government

- **Defense Policy Board:** Guest, September 19-20, 2001

Education

- **University of London:** Ph.D., 1939

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Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs

A prominent member of the rightwing "pro-Israel" lobby, JINSA claims to be "the most influential group on the issue of U.S.-Israel military relations." Specializing in facilitating military-to-military ties between the United States and Israel, JINSA recently hired Michael Makovsky as its CEO. A dual U.S.-Israeli citizen and veteran of the Israeli army, Makovsky previously ran the foreign policy program at the Bipartisan Policy Center, where he oversaw numerous studies aimed at pressuring the United States to adopt a more confrontational approach with Iran.

Cheney, Lynne

Lynne Cheney, the spouse of former vice president Dick Cheney and a vigorous defender of the Bush-Cheney legacy, thinks the Clintons are still pulling the strings in U.S. politics. In a recent interview, the former National Endowment for the Humanities chair accused the Clintons, inexplicably, of planting a recent story by Monica Lewinsky in *Vanity Fair*. She also complained that the dustup over the killing of U.S. diplomats in Benghazi, which Cheney said was "really about the Clintons," had been "distorted" by critics who said the episode was a minor one compared to the fallout over the Iraq War.

Becker, Gary (1930-2014)

Gary Becker, a Nobel Prize-winning economist known for his rightist tendencies, passed away in early May. Becker received attention recently when reviewers of Thomas Piketty's widely lauded new work on twenty-first century capitalism noted the book's critique of the conservative economist's work. According to Piketty, Becker used presumption rather than data to justify his neoliberal economic theories, creating illusory models that were "no more than an excuse for occupying the terrain and masking the vacuity of the content." Though primarily known as an economist, Becker was a strong supporter of the Bush administration's "war on terror" and a member of Donald Rumsfeld's Defense Policy Board. In recent years, however, he had concluded that "except under extreme circumstances, it is not worth intervening in another country's squabbles."

Foundation for Defense of Democracies

The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), a neoconservative think tank and advocacy group based in Washington, appears eager for a U.S.-led war in Iran. The foundation claims to have a bipartisan support base, but leaked documents have revealed that FDD's funders come from a very small pool of Republican mega-donors, including Home Depot founder Bernard Marcus, hedge fund billionaire Paul Singer, and casino magnate Sheldon Adelson.

Schlesinger, James (1929-2014)

James Schlesinger, who passed away in March, was an elite member of hawkish policy circles for decades. In the 1970s, he served under several administrations as the director of the CIA, secretary of defense, and secretary of energy, before entering the corporate world and serving on government advisory panels for the

remainder of his career. A lifelong advocate of nuclear weapons, he was once called the “Yoda” of nuclear strategists. Despite his generally hawkish views, Schlesinger evinced an independent streak, once warning military leaders not to take any order to mobilize from President Richard Nixon—whom Schlesinger thought was dangerously unstable—unless he or Henry Kissinger had approved it.

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